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SERMON ON

THE TALENTS

BY

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MACNAB STREET
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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THE TALENTS

February 22nd, 1920

One of the famous musicians divided humanity into two classes: "Those who play the violin and those who don't." The truth of that of course is so obvious that it leaves no room for argument; but it is not a very satisfactory classification, for we feel that it does not tell us quite enough about those who don't play the violin." There might be something interesting even about them.

Jesus covered the ground more fully and satisfactorily in His estimate of society, though He also recognized only two classes, He was near the end of His ministry when He uttered this parable. He had spent three years in public life, mingling with all sorts and conditions of men and observing them under a great variety of circumstances, but He had not changed His classification; it was just the same as it was when He delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus never had to revise His notes or correct His statements. He never had to confess that on such and such occasion He had been mistaken or admit that He had judged too hastily.

When He closed that first great public discourse He divided His hearers into two classes —the wise and the foolish. So now after a very varied experience, in this parable of the talents, He divided men into two classes—the faithful and the unfaithful, those who make the best use of their opportunities and those who neglect them. There is no middle class. There is no hint of encouragement for those who comfort themselves with the thought that while they are not doing as much good as they might, they are doing some, and are at least taking a respectable part in the Christian enterprises of the community and the world. There are just two classes, the faithful and the unfaithful.

Bishop Gore says that "Christ represents Himself in this parable as an exacting business man of the best type," and while the conditions of life here may seem severe, they must appear to us entirely reasonable. They cannot be considered inconsistent with either Divine love or justice. He puts us on our honour, and makes it quite as much for our own good as His that we should be faithful and efficient. We would dishonour Him if we thought of His love as mere good nature or unmoral kindness which would allow us to do as we liked with life's opportunities. And on the other hand He would dishonour us if He were satisfied with casual, half-hearted service.

We can hardly quarrel with the Divine requirement that we will work earnestly and make the best use of what has been entrusted to us. There would be no moral value in life at all, if it made no difference whether we were earnest or easy-going, philanthropic or selfish. Life would be deprived of all its grandeur and inspiration—it would be intolerably stale and unromantic if at last it would be all the same whether we grovelled through life with no

higher ambition than to make a living, or filled our life with purposeful, consecrated endeavours. Life would be meaningless chaos if there were no judgment in it; the character of God would command no reverence and Heaven would have no alluring charms if in the end it was to be just the same for the faithful and the indifferent, for those who trade earnestly with their talents and those who bury them in the ground.

Now in this parable we have Christ's recognition of life's inequalities. In the parable of "The Pounds," which we studied some weeks ago, we noted that each servant received the same, and there is a sense in which that is true; but here one servant received five talents, another two, and another one.

We often hear an angry outcry against the inequalities of life. Society is full of bitter jealousies, and the great error of radical socialism is that the discontented members of society think they can reduce things to a basis of equality by revolution.

Equal rights of course all men should have—and yet that is just one of the perils of democracy. When ignorance enjoys the same rights as intelligence, when the unscrupulous have the same privileges as the conscientious, where is the sanity of government to be expected? A great many people to-day have more rights than they know how to exercise, and instead of using them for the general welfare, they are using them to upset the time-honoured institutions of society and stop the wheels of human progress.

But when men have gotten their equal rights, what about the inequalities of endowment? There is a problem that lies beyond the power of the revolutionaries. No socialistic

propaganda or change of government or Act of Parliament can ever alter that universal and divinely-ordered fact.

However, we observe here that each man was given according to his ability. Jesus meant us to learn from this that our various gifts and opportunities and responsibilities are judiciously and considerately allotted; that that there is nothing accidental about our differences that our various endowments are given "with the discriminating hand of God."

If we realized this truth and remembered it, would we not be more contented with our lot? We would not be embittered by envy. We would not be so ready to say how happy we should be if we were like so and so. If God has given us only two talents we should not be jealous of those to whom He has given five, for it is good to remember that, as George Eliot says, "the blessed work of helping the world forward could never be done by the five-talent people alone." If we have only two talents we are in very good company after all, for it is the average people, rather than the brilliant geniuses, who do by far the biggest share of God's work in the world.

Now what do these talents represent? Well, for one thing, they mean our natural gifts. In Jesus' day a talent meant simply a certain amount of money, but He gave it a wider meaning. And it is "by a true instinct of interpretation that our common English speech has borrowed from this parable the word "talents." We speak now of a "talented" man, meaning that he is richly gifted, and it was the transforming touch of Jesus that gave the word this nobler significance. It was said of Goldsmith that "he touched nothing which he did not adorn," but how much truer that was of Jesus.

Our natural gifts are entrusted to us then; they carry responsibilities. We are required to improve them and make the best use of them. That gives education a religious value, you see. To educate ourselves, particularly along the line of our natural endowments, is part of the great duty of life. It may be a talent for music, or a talent for inventing or constructing things, or a talent for business, or a talent for teaching, or a talent for artistic handiwork. We owe it to God to make the best use of that talent, to make the most of our opportunities for development and service along that particular line.

Michael Angelo had the spirit of the faithful servant. When he was eighty years of age and had immortalized himself in the world of art, he said: "I am still learning."

The person who is satisfied with respectable mediocrity in the development of any natural gift is unfaithful to God. This is, doubtless, at least one respect in which many of us have been slothful. We have not thought of these natural gifts religiously. We have not associated them with consecration. We have thought it was pretty much a matter of personal choice or convenience whether we cultivated them or not. But if God has given us the ability and the opportunity to be experts or masters in any particular line, and we never aspire beyond the commonplace we are cheating Him.

Then, too, the talents may be taken to represent opportunities for service, and here again there is variety or inequality, one receiving five and another two, and another one. These are largely determined by our natural gifts and our circumstances.

Some people have greater capacity for service than others; some have more spare time to devote to charitable and philanthropic work; some have more money with which to help forward the good causes of the world; some by virtue of their family connections have a greater possible social influence. But we are all represented here in the parable. We have gotten five, or two, or one. There is no one who has not some opportunity or chance to do good.

And one of the common temptations of the average person, whose opportunities are not conspicuous and whose gifts are ordinary is that of thinking that it does not matter very much whether he exerts himself or not. He feels so unimportant and his talents are so limited that he is inclined to think that his contribution to the sum-total of Christian effort does not matter.

Most of us have a very fair conceit of ourselves in other respects, but when it comes to the question of social or religious service we seem to be amazingly humble. And many good people hold back and do not trade with their talents as they should, because they underestimate their social value. But one truth stands out in this parable with unmistakable plainness, and that is that even the least endowed of God's servants is vitally important to His enterprise. We could understand God being disappointed if the richly endowed man buried his five talents, but the disappointment here is that the man with only one talent failed to make the best use of it.

I think we are beginning to learn, though not too soon, that nothing counts so much in the interests of moral and religious reform as the quiet personal service of humble men and

women. We have been leaving things too much to the leaders; we have been cherishing the hope that some day Parliament would usher in the millenium; we have been trying the Banquet style of reform, and we have been overlooking the personal element, the value of faithful, consecrated individual effort, the Christian influence of the common man.

For example, the question of religious education in the schools has aroused an endless amount of discussion and controversy, but the appalling need that has been causing anxiety for legislation in that direction points us back to the simple fundamental requirement, viz., faithful religious education in the home by God's appointed teachers, the parents. A million parents faithfully using one or two talents in the home can do far more than a thousand public teachers, though they use five talents never so faithfully.

Now there are some fine points in this parable which we must leave for consideration next Sunday, but I cannot close without noting the solemn significance which the parable gives to our human life.

We all have some talents and some opportunities for service, and these have been given in trust; they did not just happen. It is not that the richly endowed are more fortunate than others or that the ones with limited gifts are less responsible than others. The same obligation rests upon us all. To each has been given "according to his ability," and some day we shall be telling the story of our life.

What kind of story will it be? A story of faithfulness or unfaithfulness? Shall we face the Master with quiet confidence because we have done our best, or shall we, in the con-

fusion of our shame, be trying to think of some plausible excuse? Shall the words "well-done" thrill us with joy, or shall the sign of the Master's disappointment fill us with remorse unspeakable?

February 29th, 1920

Last Sunday morning we tried to set forth in a general way the main teaching of this parable. We spoke of our various endowments and their corresponding responsibilities; of the solemn significance which the parable gives to human life.

Today I would like to continue the study of it and speak particularly of its encouragements.

There is another thought suggested here, it seems to me, which is not referred to in the usual conventional treatment of this parable, but it would be a strange thing if any interpreter had said the last word as to the meaning of these wonderful teachings of Jesus.

As we have seen, the Master trusted one of his servants with five talents, another with two and another with one. The first two servants traded earnestly wit htheirs and were well repaid. The other did not think it worth while —in other words, he was a cynic. I do not think it was because he received only one talent that he buried it in the ground; it was because he took a wrong view of God and consequently of life. This man, I am convinced, would have done exactly the same thing if he had received five talents.

Now what does all this teach us? Surely this, that we are justified in taking a healthy view of life, in trusting the Divine scheme of things, in believing that the world is built on sound principles, in believing that honest endeavor is worth while.

We have two types represented here—the enthusiast and the cynic, and Jesus made it as plain as it could be made that the enthusiast

was right. Take the case of the man who received the one talent. He said "I knew thee that thou art a hard man reaping where thou hast not sown, and I was afraid and went and hid the talent in the ground." That is the language of the cynic always and everywhere. What was the use, he thought, of trading with the talent in an irrational world with Caprice on the throne? What assurance was there that ambition and energy would pay? And so he could not be bothered.

That temper has not perished from the earth—that view of enthusiasm as folly and all noble social endeavor as a waste of time and strength.

In one of Mrs. Humphrey Ward's novels we find this very type portrayed. Stephen Langham is the modern cynic who speaks of "the futility of enthusiasm, and the practical absurdity of trying to realize any of the mind's inward dreams." And you remember the advice given to Pendennis, "Neither to hope very much nor believe very much; the main thing is not to be duped and to get a comfortable seat at the vain show of life." That is all expressing in other language the sentiments of this sceptical servant in the parable.

Occasionally one hears people yet saying, "What is the use? The more you do for people the less it is appreciated. The best way is not to be bothered; to look out for yourself." Have you never heard people talk like that? I know some whose view of life is that exactly. Christ has pictured these people here in the parable to a nicety.

This servant said in effect, "I was afraid to trade with the talent in such a risky world; I was afraid of wasting it; I was afraid of being duped, so I just hid it in the ground." The

whole trouble with that servant was that he had an unhealthy mind, the temper of the cynic. He did not trust his Lord; he did not trust the world. He was afraid that money given to charity might be injudiciously spent, that kindness might be thrown away, that sympathy might be misunderstood, that selfishness might be imposed upon. So he just played safe.

The other two servants represent the healthy type. They were both enthusiasts. They were both a hundred per cent. efficient, and men do not double their talents without enthusiasm, without throwing themselves heart and soul into the great enterprise of life.

And they do that because of their fundamental belief that it is worth while, that the world is not ruled by Caprice, or in other words, because they trust the Lord who gave them the talents to trade with.

There were times, of course, when the results of their trading were not apparent. I am quite shre they had not gone home every night with the knowletge that they had added just so much more. They had taken risks, bold ventures of faith. They had not always been cautious, seeking only safe investments and gilt-edged securities, for such is not the spirit of the faithful servant of Christ. In the investment of talent and influence for God and the godd of the world, the right motto is, "Never venture, never win."

These two servants just went on trading with faith and industry and enthusiasm, not knowing exactly how their account stood or what gains they had made, but in the day of reckoning the light flashed upon it all and no doubt they were surprised when they discoverd that the talents had doubled.

Their ideals had not been delusions, their daring ventures in service had been justified, their investments of sympathy and kindness and generosity had all brought in astonishingly handsome returns.

George Stevenson, the inventor of the first locomotive, had this for his working motto, "Make the best of everything, think the best of everybody, hope the best for yourself." He had the healthy mind of these two faithful servants, and the people with that philosophy, with that outlook on life and that view of the world are the people who make their lives a source of blessing and inspiration to others.

One writer says, "The other day I saw a photograph of a back yard. It was a little bit of a place, littered with tin cans and overgrown with weeds. But it came into the hands of a man who believed in making the best of things. After a year had passed another photograph was taken. It was still as small as ever and overlooked by blank walls of brick. But it was a perfect little oasis of beauty amid a wilderness of bricks and slates." Surely that spirit pays!

Now just a final word about the certain rewards of faithfulness. I think that injunction of Paul's might be fitly linked with this parable, "Wherefore be ye steadfast, always abounding in the works of the Lord, for as much as ye know that your labor is not in vain."

Yes, and the reward of the servant with two talents was equal to that of the servant with five. He was invited to enter into the same joy. He had been as faithful as his more gifted brother, and though his place in the world had been more obscure, his position in heaven was equally honorable.

Why was this two-talent man introduced at all? The two types—the enthusiast and the cynic, would have been represented without him. Do you not think it was because the considerate Christ wanted to encourage the common average man? Jesus wanted all the world to know that commonplace service, done in the faithful spirit, is just as much appreciated as the conspicuous service of the richly talented.

It has been suggested that if these two faithful servants had come to the Master and said that they had done their best but had nothing to show for all their industry, it would have been just the same. But the fact is that such a thing could not happen in a moral world. Labor for God can never be in vain. Consecration can never come to failure. Talents honestly used are bound to accumulate, though of course we will never know what the increase has been till the daybreak and the shadows flee away, and the whole story of our life is told.

The only absolutely safe and sure investments are the investments we make in the service of God. There cannot be such a thing as failure. There cannot be such a thing as a waste of kindness or sympathy. There cannot be such a thing as "love's labor lost." Even in this life the rewards of the Christian are wonderful, but "the best is yet to be."

As Leighton beautifully said: "It is only a small part we can receive here. Some drops of joy entering into us, but there we shall enter into joy, as vessels put into a sea of happiness.

For all who venture with their talents for Christ there is the joy of knowing that they are doing something supremely worth while, and there is also the thrill of expectancy, as they look forward to the crown of all their effort, the sound of those words which will be like sweetest music, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

—*Beverly Ketchen*